

## *A Fugitive from Pride*

**Malcolm Lowry: A Biography**, by Douglas Day, *New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. 483 pp. \$10.00.*

A COUNTRY-HOUSE-BRED and Cambridge-educated Englishman, Malcolm Lowry spent his best creative years as a recluse in Dollarton, British Columbia, with junkets to Mexico (from which he was expelled twice) serving as his own kind of confrontation with the subconscious. Out of this confrontation he was able to create a damned character, the consul Geoffrey Firmin, around whom is spun the endlessly recomposed masterpiece *Under the Volcano*. That Lowry was a genius is the firmest-held of the assumptions made by Douglas Day, and indeed seems incontest-

able. Day is also right in calling Lowry "a great author who happens to have written only one great book" and in believing that Lowry had few natural gifts as a writer, and that at least one motive for his alcoholism was to escape the arduousness of composing what the driving edicts of his vision were placing before him and his cumbersome hands. (He would write standing up, puffing as though under a goad; and one of the abiding memories a reader of this book will come away with is that of Lowry's small, ill-shaped, self-re-criminating hands—though he was an accomplished ukelele player!)

The strengths of the book derive from Day's conviction about the magnitude of Lowry's vision, despite the desuetude of his life, combined with a narrative skill especially adroit at pinning down the figures in Lowry's life (and they were almost all glancing figures). There were his first, runaway wife Jan; his friend Conrad Aiken, who accepted a paid post as Lowry's guardian; his translator Clarisse Francillon, one of several women who ministered to him in his recalcitrant later years, and who "was saddened to observe that Paris interested Lowry not at all. Never during this entire period [1948-49] did she see him bother to look at any object of architectural or historical interest." But how refreshing (one might be moved to say). Dog days or not. Lowry was not one to be revived by things with vested values, and his demon would not be found in civilization's flourishing spots, but rather, under volcanoes.

There was an antithesis to the volcanoes—the sea. Lowry never felt the sea as threatening, rather as salutary. It seemed to correspond with something benign also held in the subconscious, so that, in opposition to the menacing inland volcano, Popocatepetl, there was in Lowry's life Burrard Inlet, near the Pacific, on which Dollarton was situated, the one place in the world where Lowry knew peace. His second wife, Margerie, lived with him at Dollarton, and appears as a redoubtable character in Day's

biography. She helped Day a great deal, but turns out to have been a bit of a menace too. Day had to get most of the anecdotes about Lowry's later years from her, and there are times when their authenticity seems questionable. She menaced Lowry even while she sustained him. Among those who, after Margerie, had considerable influence on Lowry, Day is superlative in his handling of Malcolm's father. This cotton broker, a Cecil Rhodes type, cut Malcolm off more than once because he wanted to exact a Prodigal Son's return. That A. O. Lowry, a teetotaler, died of cirrhosis of the liver is a sad irony, doubled on by the fact that he feared his son would be ruined by grasping women, and was not told in the days before his death that Malcolm had found and married Margerie, a girl anything but grasping.

If not precociously gifted, Lowry was a brave writer. Some of the publishing pitfalls he fell into attest this bravery, because it was rare for him to get near to the publishing stage. He always had unfinished drafts about him, his collected works all being written simultaneously as it were. If he did get a completed script to a publisher, something bizarre would happen (half-occasioned by himself—Day is also sharp on Lowry's appealing innocence). In the case of his first book *Ultramarine*, after acceptance the editors lost the manuscript. There was no carbon, and when Lowry got up a new script for them, almost from scratch, he begged them not to accept it unless they "really believed in its promise." This was a convenient outcard, and so they returned it. When the news came of the rejection of the third draft of *Under the Volcano*, the Lowrys were able to write this to their agent: "In thinking the book was so good when we sent it to you, perhaps we confused a spiritual victory with an aesthetic one, since it is impossible to convey to you the difficulties under which it was completed. . . ." There is a largesse of spirit in that reply, even though Lowry was "prostrated with disappointment."

Describing the aftermath of *Under the*

*Volcano's* triumph, in New York in 1947, Day reports how the praises Lowry received became "entirely too much. His only response was to draw almost totally within himself, and to drink." Day attributes this relapse to "real terror in the face of social confrontations," and makes rather similar prosaic judgments about Lowry's later complaints over his success. Herein lies a weakness of the biography—a tendency not to see the almost damning, certainly paralyzing, moral sensitivity of Lowry. For a man of his conscience, it seems wrong to try to reconstruct clinically, as Day does at the beginning of the book, the reasons for Lowry's alcoholism. It is true that Day made a good tactical decision to begin the book near the end of Lowry's life, where the subject's excessive dependence on alcohol could be powerfully rendered. But in the opening chapters Day makes too many psychological forays, becoming obsessed with the question: *Why*? It is the job of a good biography to tell us *what* rather than *why*: and Day's success is to have told us, over nine-tenths of this book, what Lowry's life was. His most daring decision, in that respect, was to give a chapter-by-chapter recounting of the second draft of *Under the Volcano*—an interlude in which *only* the "what" is told, and told brilliantly. The "why" of Lowry's alcoholism and self-destructiveness—of his inability to cope, especially with success—seems buried at the heart of the only other great piece of writing left by him, the story of "The Forest Path to the Spring." Here a successful composer of a jazz opera (one of Lowry's avocations) chooses to return to a Dollarton-like reclusiveness, because, as Day says, "the man knows that out there [in the applauding world] he will be subject to the pride he feels in his accomplishment. . . ."

J. D. Salinger once said of the true artist that he is dazzled to death by his own scruples. Thus it would seem best—if Lowry was indeed the genius he has been taken for—to look for the secrets of his alcoholism in just such a fear of the inci-

dent pride that would batten on achievement. As the adventurer D'Annunzio once said of the ordinariness of moral laxity: "Being *immoral*? What could be more simple! But only a genius can be *moral*."

Reviewed by JOHN RUSSELL

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### *The Mind and the Method*

**The Origin of Subjectivity: An Essay on Descartes**, by Hiram Caton, *New Haven: The Yale University Press, 1973. xvi + 202 pp. + appendices A and B. \$12.50.*

WHEN EDMUND HUSSERL undertook a "radical new beginning of philosophy" he advocated a return to the Cartesian *Meditations*, "not to adopt their content but, in not doing so, to renew with greater intensity the radicalness of their spirit . . ." Mr. Caton, too, would have us return to the *Meditations*, and he presents us with a radical new interpretation of their content. We are told that *Meditations*, which may be the best philosophical work Descartes turned out, can be correctly understood only by means of a new approach, which the book under review purports to make evident.

The phrase "the origin of subjectivity" demands clarification. Subjectivity is contrasted with subjectivism, or the view that all truth, beauty and goodness are relative to the opinions of the subject who makes judgments. Subjectivity, on the other hand, allows room for universal truth, beauty and goodness, but insists that human consciousness is the seat of these judgments, which consciousness all subjects share in common. Thus when Descartes analyzes (say) perception as a result of reflection on his own experience he claims that what is true for him is true *pari passu* for all other perceiving subjects.